TAI - VHS - Avahan

GOOD PRACTICE DOCUMENTATION

FOSTERING COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION THROUGH COMMUNITY EVENTS

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Tamil Nadu AIDS Initiative (TAI)
Voluntary Health Services (VHS)

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Fostering Community Mobilization through Community Events

Introduction

Tamil Nadu AIDS Initiative (TAI) has been implementing HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention program among the sex worker community since 2004. During the initial stages of the program, TAI faced difficulties in getting sex workers organized into groups. The sex workers showed resistance in coming together fearing the disclosure about their identity. They suffered stigma and discrimination from general public and were vulnerable to threats and violence from rowdies, pimps, brokers, auto-drivers and law enforcing agents. They were living with fear which prevented them from engaging in group activities.

TAI began outreach activities (one-to-one and one-to-group) at the hotspots and encounter points. The sex workers' interest and involvement in the outreach activities was low because they suffered from guilt and low self-esteem. TAI felt the need for providing confidence to the community to express their concerns without fear and inhibitions. Thus, outreach messages were focused on building confidence and improving self-esteem. Messages were also provided on the importance of having an additional source of income, savings and the need to bring up children in a healthy environment, besides STI/ HIV/AIDS prevention.The community members began to understand that there was a 'human touch' to the efforts of TAI beyond HIV prevention. This led to an increase in the interest of community members to participate in group meetings.

Efforts towards Community Mobilization

The attempts of TAI in organizing the community into small groups at the drop-in-center (DIC) helped them feel a sense of ownership towards the program. Events such as 'Cultural Expression Day' and 'Voices of the Community' were held with a minimum of 25 - 30 community members participating from different clusters. Each of the events had a specific agenda and helped the community members express their concerns and demands besides showcasing/displaying their talents. These meetings helped monitor the progress of the program activities using CLSI (Community Led Structural Intervention) tool, the indicators such as an overpowering sense of mission, program design, service delivery, program monitoring, vulnerability reduction and governance were measured.

The efforts to gather the community members gained momentum through 'Community Conventions' attended by 100 to 150 community members at the district level. These events were organized mainly to get them together, celebrate, display their talents and imbibe messages on program activities.

Subsequently, TAI moved on to organizing state-level conventions for sex workers with participation of around 1,000 community members. The major objective of organizing such events was to disseminate messages simultaneously to a larger group achieving wider reach and to ensure uniformity in communication.

Bringing community together through events

All community events had specific agenda depending on the nature of the event. The agenda was centered on the theme of the event; for example the specific agenda of Peer Educator's convention was to strengthen outreach skills. Besides, TAI also provided information on awareness and prevention of STI/HIV/AIDS along with program activities so as to reach a large number of community members simultaneously. Community members were encouraged to discuss in groups and evolve themes, prepare content and presentations for the event. They also played a role in the events by way of inaugural dance, compering the event and setting up stalls. Small events had

150 to 200 community participants and large events had 1000 to 1500.

The first event was called the Community Sharing and Learning Forum (CSLF), held at Chennai with the participation of around 200 community members. The initial events focused on evoking a sense of togetherness among the community members, helping them come out of isolation and providing them with the opportunity to express their feelings. This was done through speeches, dramas, songs and danceswhich helped them express their talents. The theme of such program was on mainstreaming with the society. The subsequent events concentrated on community representing their issues and seeking solutions, demand generation for services and providing suggestions for future programs. Later, some

events had vibrant community members come forward and express their views on self-development and community mobilization. They did this in the presence of policy makers who were invited to the events as guests.

Community events helped TAI in mid-course corrections of the program. Despite the various methods that were followed for mid-course corrections, TAI built in a process of validating and disseminating the program findings in an interactive manner, thereby conducting an evaluation of the program. Such events were used to provide training to the community members who lacked certain skills like outreach and micro-level planning.

Increased enrollment in the program

The messages in major events stressed the need to overcome guilt, improve self-esteem and come together for common cause. During these events importance and respect was given to them by listening to their concerns.The issues were taken up and addressed by bringing about innovations in the program. The community members felt that the TAI understood their problems and were empathetic. The community members' developed confidence in the program and started looking for long term association with project activities.

The services available for the community were discussed in events which helped increase awareness about the program components. Some of the components like the clinic and counseling services in the drop in center were highly appreciated as they addressed the problem of

stigma and discrimination. The space was also used by them to come together, rest, relax and share their concerns. As confidentiality was ensured at all levels, the faith and trust of the community in the program improved. This resulted in an increase in the enrollment of the community members in the program. The referrals of new community members through the existing members also increased.

Emergence of CBOs

TAI has conducted around 228 events in a span of 9 years. Care was taken to ensure community participation at all levels aiming at reaching saturation coverage. During these events the community members participated in stage plays, debates, quiz and oratorical competitions. They expressed themselves with confidence and voiced their concerns keeping in mind the benefit of the community at large. Some of the community members who expressed their views in events on issues such as violence on sex workers, stigma and discrimination faced by them and power structure taking control of their lives later emerged as community leaders. Keeping in mind the transition of the program to the natural owners, TAI began the process of identifying leaders during these events. These leaders began assuming responsibilities in community mobilization efforts and subsequently CBOs were formed.

CBOs overcoming challenges

1   Positive Prevention

The CBOs faced challenges in collectivizing HIV positive community members who were reluctant to

avail services fearing exposure of their status. TAI started a program for the positive community member's called "Emotional Psychosocial & Nutritional Support Program". The community members received counseling, regular medical checkup and nutritional supplements; reminders to access ART services. TAI felt the need to conduct large scale events for the positive community members to provide them with focused and inspiring messages and build their confidence. Besides messages on positive prevention, they were helped to connect spiritually to improve their coping mechanism. For the first time around 1000 HIV positive community members gathered for experience sharing and to understand issues regarding positive prevention. Such event resulted in successful mobilization of positive community members.

2. Networking with government officials for social entitlements

One of the objectives of the events was to help community members familiarize with the existing government schemes and access them. To facilitate this process, the dignitaries for the events were chosen from government organizations and sensitized about the needs of the community. Most of these events culminated with an assurance from these officials to address the needs represented by the community. In some instances new schemes were also initiated by the government officials. These events even resulted in bringing about policy level changes. Following such events the CBO leaders visited the government offices and submitted applications for voter ID cards, ration cards, widow/destitute pensions and positive community members' pension.

3. Addressing violence through advocacy

The police officials who were invited for such events were sensitized about violence against the community. The community leaders explained regarding the system they followed to address violence. They sought support from police officials in addressing the reported cased of violence. This led to effective management of the violence redressal system being followed by the CBOs and increased the allegiance of the community towards the program.

4. Mainstreaming the marginalized

Mainstreaming the transgender community was felt important in order to help them gain societal acceptance and enable them to access government entitlements. Events provided a platform to showcase their talent and gain visibility in the society. Based on requests from the transgender community, TAI helped in conducting programs based on the theme 'We too for healthy society'. Transgenders were encouraged to engage in social service activities which captured the attention of society and media. The community members participated in activities such as eye donation, tree planting, working with Anganawadi workers to spread health messages, adult literacy classes etc. These efforts over the years captured the attention of the policy makers in the government. One of the events resulted in the establishment of Welfare board for the transgenders and declaration of the Transgender Day on 15th April. This effort led to

Discussion:

TAI overcame the challenges of collectivizing the community in the initial stage of the project by organizing events. These events provided a platform for the hidden community members to overcome their inhibitions and assemble under one roof for a cause. The community members in large gatherings interacted with each other and gained confidence to discuss issues and work towards finding solutions. Well planned thematic events resulted in the community recognizing the skills and talents they possessed and also leading to community mobilization. The CBO formation began from 2006 onward; presently 23 CBOs (10 MSW, 13 FSW) are registered and have applied for formal recognition with the statutory bodies. The CBOs were capacitated are received grants from TNSACS for implementing targeted intervention (TI).The technical inputs from the capacity building organizations of Avahan helped them scale up their activities adhering to the operational guidelines.

The events became a platform for the community members to express themselves freely. The community members looked forward to such events as they provided an atmosphere of jubilation along with informative and interactive sessions on the program. Many community members who had excellent leadership qualities, communication skills, intelligence to perceive their situation and were interested in community welfare made presentations during the events. Some of the community members contested the CBO elections thought the positions were honorary and for a short term. Although the responsibility of implementing exclusive sex worker CBO was a challenge, many of the leaders wanted to prove themselves suitable for the position by working towards it. The CBO board member's turnover was minimal because they appreciated the responsibility which came with a sense of importance attached to it. Apart from the board members, the second line leaders at the block level and the grass root level leaders were developed.

Events were of great relevance in community mobilization as they helped the scattered marginalized community to become a part of a homogeneous group and build solidarity to accelerate a community movement. The realization of common problems faced by the community such as stigma, discrimination and vulnerability made them come together to advocate for their rights under the umbrella of the CBO.

TAI ensured confidentiality even while conducting large events by sensitizing the media to avoid undue exposure and highlight the event as one for the marginalized.

The mandate of most of the events was to involve the community members in the area of planning and organizing. These community events led to a sense of ownership and resulted in community movement. The empowered community members participated in International Conferences and made paper presentation on topics dealing with stigma and discrimination.

increasing the faith of the TG community in the program.

Conclusion:

Community events organized by TAI have resulted in bringing about a sense of belonging among the community members and enabled them to collectively respond to challenges. The community which was hidden has now come out to advocate for their rights. Major events have contributed in community mobilization and formation of CBOs and thereby strengthening the process of community empowerment.

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